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The Fragmented Digital Gaze:  
The effects of multimodal composition on narrative perspective

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Lyle Skains is a Lecturer in Creative Writing and Digital Media at Bangor University. She is a practicing professional writer and researcher in fiction composition, conducting practice-led creative experiments into the effects of emerging technology on writer, reader, and narrative. She is a member of the Electronic Literature Organization, and a current editor for the associated Electronic Literature Directory. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing & Digital Media from Bangor University, and a Masters in Professional Writing from the University of Southern California.

**Abstract:**

As society as a whole moves more and more into the multiplicative frames of the digital world, it is important to understand how using these interfaces affects how we think and how we communicate. In this paper, the focus is on a creative genre of human communication: narrative. Emerging technologies have historically had various impacts on narrative fiction, from the emergence of mimetic narratives in novel form, to the camera's influence on techniques such as flashback, and character gaze and perspective. These technologies can be seen to engage in an authorial partnership with the composer, "collaborating to create new media" (Weight 2006, p. 415), new narrative forms and practices. The specific affordances of digital media introduce multimodality, polylinearity, and reader/player interaction to fiction; the practice of composing such multimodal works affects narrative perspective, leading to fragmented and layered narration, metalepsis, and "unnatural narrators" (Richardson 2006). This paper presents research based in the practice of creating a multimodal project, *Færwhile* (the digital component of this paper), examining the progression of narrative perspective from mimetic to unnatural, analyzing the various narrative perspectives. While Richardson (2006) argues that the postmodern narrative perspective (utilizing contradictory, permeable, and dis-framed narrators) leads to "postmodern unreliability", this examination of the *Færwhile* multimodal narrative will argue that a cohesive voice and its communicated metaphor can be created from the layering of disparate narrative perspectives. The effects described herein have implications for digital engagement and communication on a wider scale, as we attempt to understand how our rapidly evolving technology is also effecting change in our cognition, composition, and understanding of events communicated in digital spaces.

**Keywords:** creative practice, multimodal narrative, narrative perspective, authorial perspective, unnatural narration, metalepsis, creative writing, digital composition

## The Fragmented Digital Gaze:

The effects of multimodal composition on narrative perspective

### Introduction

As a society, we have been moving more and more to online applications, electronic communications, and digital composition. We stream movies, chat through social media and email, and explore our world and current events through a stack of open browser tabs. We may be watching a sporting event on one device while tweeting about it on another, or writing a paper in one application while researching (and procrastinating) in another digital window. Public media expresses our concerns about how the internet is “rewiring” our brains<sup>1</sup>, while research focuses more broadly on communication strategies, psychology, attention, consciousness, collective intelligence, virtuality, identity, and many more. As society as a whole moves more and more into the multiplicative frames of the digital world, it is important to understand how using these interfaces affects how we think and how we communicate. The practice-led experimentation in creative writing described in this paper presents a research-necessary narrow focus on one aspect of this evolution in human communication: how shifting from an established print-writing process, with its linear structure and single-frame composition space, to a digital composition process – incorporating multiple, layered composition spaces and branching, networked structures – affected one creative writer’s practice and narrative. The findings, however, can be extrapolated much more broadly, used as a springboard to further qualitative studies about how our engagement in multiple devices, platforms, and digital spaces at any given time affects our cognition and communication strategies.

Commented [EU1]: Terrific, Lyle. Thanks!

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<sup>1</sup> See various articles online, such as *The Huffington Post*, 2013; Stafford, 2012; and Harris, 2010.

Narrative is arguably one of human beings' primary communication strategies. Seymour Chatman (1978) proposes that narrative, like language itself, is a semiotic structure, its form (discourse) signifying its content (story). He includes in his concept of narrative both traditional literary narratives and visuals such as film, which is echoed in more recent narratological theory (Ryan, 2006). If narrative is a semiotic structure, then it follows that the modes employed in its construction affect its expression; Chatman argues that visual expression such as film has particular affordances (detail, realism) that differ from written expression (emotion, thoughts) (cf. Hayles, 2002; Ryan, 2006). This paper, based on practice-led experimentation in digital fiction, explores the effects of multimodal composition on narrative expression in digital media, particularly in terms of narrative perspective and ontology. Specifically, this paper examines how the unique affordances and conventions of digital composition affect the writer's cognition, and thus facilitate unnatural narration<sup>2</sup> in the form of altered narrative perspective, multiple narration, and metalepsis.

A note on method: "practice-led" connotes a creative experiment designed to answer questions about the process and results of the practice itself; "it involves the identification of research questions and problems, but the research methods, contexts and outputs then involve a significant focus on creative practice" (Sullivan, 2009, p. 48). The research presented here aligns foremost with Graeme Sullivan's 2009 *conceptual* framework of practice-led research, in that the creative undertaking is an attempt to understand the artefacts themselves, as well as the cognitive and communication processes behind them. The digital fiction *Færwhile: A Journey Through a Space of Time* [hypermodal #1/FWHome.html] was conceived and composed for the express research purpose of answering questions about the effects of digital composition on practice and narrative. As such, I engaged in ethnomethodological observation (Garfinkel, 1967; cf. Brandt, 1992) of my writing activities,

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<sup>2</sup> The term "unnatural" is used as a counterpart to Monika Fludernik's theory of "natural" narratology, and is discussed more thoroughly below. See Fludernik 1996; Alber, et al. 2010; Fludernik, 2012; and Alber, et al. 2012.

maintaining notes, journal entries, comments on drafts, and other relevant, observable paratexts to the composition, in order to "make continual sense to [myself] of what [I was] doing" (Brandt, 1992, p. 324). I was then able to interpret these notes and paratexts, placing them within the context of composition cognition (Flower & Hayes, 1981), and to conduct post-textual, media-specific analysis (Hayles, 2002) of the narratives that resulted. In this manner, the various strengths of practice-led research, ethnomethodology, cognitive process, and post-textual analysis are combined into a robust method<sup>3</sup> of evaluating the activities of the practitioner/researcher, and the resulting discussion is presented here.

Jan Alber notes that the structures of fictional narratives continuously employ new frames and unconventional techniques in the discourse in order to constantly refresh the message of the story; the field of "unnatural narratology" has emerged to study how these unnatural elements create new genres and engage the reader's cognitive architectures in determining the message of the underlying story (2011). Alber defines unnatural narratives as those that incorporate "physically [and logically] impossible scenarios and events" (2009, p. 80), which is a broad definition that includes storyworlds that operate outside known laws of physics (such as fantasy) as well as deconstructions of the anthropomorphic narrator and traditional human character (Alber & Heinze, 2011, p. 6). Examples of such deconstructions include animal narrators (as in "Threading"[hypermodal #1/Threading.html]); narrators who are deceased; omniscient first-person narrators; non-human narrators such as inanimate objects, computer programs, or robots; and other notions of "impossible narrators", at least in terms of narrative as natural mimesis of human storytelling (p. 7). As much of my work is in the genre of fantasy and magical realism and would thus be deemed unnatural by this definition, it is useful to refine this definition according to Brian Richardson. Richardson (2011) makes a distinction between mimetic,

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3 Outlined more thoroughly in Skains 2013.

non-mimetic, and anti-mimetic narratives, and restricts the unnatural to the latter: "mimetic attempts to reproduce the actual; non-mimetic doesn't bother (fairy tales, etc.), and anti-mimetic points out its own constructedness, the artificiality of many of its techniques, and its inherent fictionality" (p. 31). Henrik Nielson (2011) suggests further refinement, a "schema that distinguishes between four categories by combining the natural/unnatural dichotomy with the conventional/unconventional dichotomy" (p. 85), placing oral storytelling and conversational narration in the natural/conventional aspect; realist literary narratives with omniscient narration in the unnatural/conventional; stream of consciousness in natural/unconventional; and experimental, postmodern works in the unnatural/unconventional. This paper examines discourse-level narrative structures, exploring how the materiality of digital media affords and even directs the writer's cognition of composition into unnatural and unconventional narration, rather than impossible worlds or events at story-level, as *Færwhile* [hypermodal #1/FWHome.html] is a fantasy tale and thus could be considered unnatural by its very conception.

The paper begins with a brief examination of my prose practice prior to this project, establishing my previous entrenchment in conventional — if not entirely natural — narrative. Following that is an examination of how the conventions of digital fiction naturalise unnatural perspectives, such as second-person, in the writer's composition process, thus encouraging the digital writer to enter into multiple narration, and how the layered cognitive activity of composing digital texts facilitates transgression of the narrative levels through metalepsis.

### **Prose Practice: Conventional Mimetic Fiction**

Mimetic fiction resembles biography in some form, either as third-person narration or first-person narration in an autobiographical fashion (Richardson, 2006, p. 6), attempting to "[imitate] actions in the real world" (Chatman, 1978, p. 19), a textualised form of Aristotle's *praxis*. While my

prose fiction prior to development of a digital composition practice is not necessarily natural by a broad definition, as it mostly falls into fantasy or magical realism, it certainly operates within the realm of conventional mimetic fiction, as demonstrated by the choices made in terms of perspective and verb tense.

Of my five published short stories, four are written in third-person mimetic biography:

"Ribbons" (2000), "A Queen for a King"[Link:

<http://www.electricspec.com/archivesite/default.asp?archiveurl=/archivesite/Skains.html>] (2008),

"Drowning Jonathan" (2009), and "Last Stop Bar & Grill" (2010). "Ribbons" and "A Queen for a King"

use past tense verb structure; the remainder use present tense, which Nielson (2011) notes began as an

unconventional technique in the 1990s, but swiftly became familiar (p. 85), particularly by the time I

was writing and publishing. "Ribbons" is the only piece of realism in my published works, though my

2005 Master's thesis novel, *The Devil's in the Fried Chicken*, is also presented as realism of an

autobiographical nature (first-person, past tense). The progression from third-person, past-tense, realist

fiction ("Ribbons") to first-person, present-tense, genre fiction ("Wish in One Hand"[Link:

<http://www.peglegpublishing.com/glassfire10/wishinonehand.htm>], 2008) demonstrates "a growing

impatience with the illusionistic rhetoric of conventional fiction" (Richardson, 2006, p. 136). My work

since my last publication ("Last Stop Bar & Grill", 2010) further demonstrates this growing impatience,

as it shows a progressively more extreme deviation from the conventional. While my fiction writing in

print moved slowly toward more unconventional practices, it was not until I moved into the multimodal

realm of digital composition that my writing practice truly fractured into the unnatural, as discussed in

the following sections.



### **Digital Conventions: Naturalising the Conventionally Unnatural**

Literature has moved away from third-person omniscient forms, toward the more unconventional uses of unreliable narrators, second-person and "we" narration, and mixed forms; away from the human voice and the psychological, toward the non- and quasi-human and "dissolution of consciousness into textuality" (Richardson, 2006, p. 13). Digital texts, in particular, have naturalised some of these unconventional narrative structures, as "hypertext fictions...call attention to the very form of networks"; "[t]extual *you*...bring[s] about a species of ontological violation that is not possible in printed texts" (Ensslin & Bell, 2012, p. 5, emphasis original); and textual mapping has led to "the conceptualization of hypertext narrative in terms of spatial metaphors" (Ryan, 2006, p. 141). The conventions of digital, interactive texts such as interactive fiction, hyperfictions, and games have familiarised readers with formerly unnatural narrative techniques: second-person narration, nonlinear navigation, and ontological metalepsis.

### **"Awake the Mighty Dread": Multiple Positioning through Second-Person**

The analogue version of "Awake the Mighty Dread"[[hypermodal #1/Awake/index.html](#)] is narrated by a covert narrator (Chatman, 1978), primarily in third-person with occasional second-person reference; the narrator is not a character within this particular tale, but a voice is clearly established, as demonstrated in the opening lines:

Once upon a space of time, a young girl set off on a journey.

Hmm. That's not quite right. Better to say the young girl was set upon a journey, by way of being lost. For if you are lost, you must travel somewhere, otherwise you will never be found. (Skains, 2013, p. 23)

The instance of second-person narration here most closely aligns with Richardson's hypothetical form,

in its use of the imperative, future verb tense, and an "unambiguous distinction between the narrator and narratee" in which the "protagonist is a possible future version of the narratee" (Richardson, 2006, p. 29). This use of second-person perspective is present even in the first draft of the analogue story, perhaps owing to the influence of my engagement with interactive fiction, and strengthened by my planning activities for translating the tale into an interactive fiction in its digital counterpart.

Second-person perspective is a standard convention for interactive fiction discourse, expressed in both standard form in the diegetic replies<sup>4</sup> and hypothetical form in the reports. Ryan (2006) notes that "[interactive fiction] is one of the rare narrative forms where the use of 'you' enters into a truly dialogical rather than merely rhetorical relation with an Other" (p. 134); the referential "you" is not merely a cognitive trick of perspective, but an invitation to command, act, and participate in directing the narrative, leading to Nick Montfort's "potential narratives" (2003, p. 14). Thus interactive fiction's "multiple positionings" permit readers to both engage in the thematic story and to identify with an "individualized narratee persona" (Mildorf, 2012, p. 77); "Awake"[[hypermodal #1/Awake/index.html](#)] exemplifies this effect, as it allows the reader to identify with Lilly, to fear her nightmares and try to shape her more pleasant (if fantastic) waking dream with interaction and commands. In this case, the threat of ontological instability inherent in second-person narration (Richardson, 2006, p. 20) is mitigated by the fact that it is a convention of interactive fiction: without the reader-player/character identification afforded by second-person narration, the communication of thematic metaphor would be reduced.

#### **Hyperlinked Characters: Multiple Narration**

Nodes, like second-person narration in interactive fiction, are conventional structures of

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<sup>4</sup> "Replies" refer to diegetic narration of storyworld existents and events; "reports" refer to non-diegetic output, such as parsing errors and clarifications (Montfort, 2011).

hyperfictions. As encapsulated sections of narrative separated by hyperlinks, they are ideal structures for changes in focalisation, not the least because they are purposely orchestrated structures rather than arbitrary page breaks, allowing for the "added opportunity to represent breaks (or leaps) of consciousness" (Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 261). The potential to hyperlink the *Færwhile* characters in the digital version — planning multiple potential narratives for each — encouraged me to enter multiple narrative perspectives in the translation process, to follow characters' potential paths in the composition process much as the digital reader may follow them. Rather than narrowing my field of perspective vision into one version of the tale to be fixed in a linear order on paper, composing in digital media, with its "constantly afforded added views of the text through the window(s) of the interface" (Ciccoricco, 2012, p. 259) — nodes — widened even the analogue novella<sup>5</sup> into multiple narration. In essence, because the digital fiction required me to compose multiple potential narratives for multiple characters, the cognitive act of imagining these potentialities leaked into the linear, prose version of the tale, pushing it beyond a conventional mimetic, single-perspective novella into unconventional and even unnatural multiple narration.

The base instance of multiple narration appears as back-and-forth (Richardson, 2006, p. 62) narrative switching between chapters. "Lost, Seeking Found"[hypermodal #1/Lost.html] is narrated through a third-person perspective, limited to Ben in a mimetic biography. The perspective switches to Amelia's first person social media narrative in "La Puerta Cerrada al Unman"[hypermodal #1/Puerta/index.html], also mimetic in its clear autobiographical content and form. "Awake the Mighty Dread"[hypermodal #1/Awake/index.html] switches the perspective again, and it is here, in both the analogue and digital forms, that the narrative perspective becomes ambiguous.

As noted in the previous section, the analogue "Awake" is narrated in covert third-person (with

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<sup>5</sup> Available in Skains, 2013.

occasional uses of second-person); the digital "Awake"[[hypermodal #1/Awake/index.html](#)] interactive fiction takes the conventional second-person narration in both its replies and reports ("You find yourself alone on a train", "You could ask about nothing"), but also incorporates a third-person narrator in the book of tales that Lilly finds on the train. Though the Trickster, as I will hereafter refer to him, is present as a character in both "Lost"[[hypermodal #1/Lost.html](#)] and "Puerta"[[hypermodal #1/Puerta/index.html](#)], cajoling both Ben and Amelia to enter Færwhile, he makes his first narrator-appearance as the covert narrator in "Awake"[[hypermodal #1/Awake/index.html](#)]. Here, the Trickster takes the role of interlocutor, "an unstable and inherently protean figure...that regularly oscillates from one function or status to another as it evokes familiar categories like narrator and narratee in order to blur their edges or transgress them altogether" (Richardson, 2006, p. 85). This interlocutor role in the analogue "Awake" as well as the second-person narration (layered, as previously discussed, with narrator, narratee, reader and storyteller) result in an ambiguous multiple narration in both versions of the text.

This effect becomes amplified as the tale progresses: the Trickster carries his narration forward in Amelia's chapter "Threading the 'While'[[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf](#)]<sup>6</sup>, both overtly narrating the story from an oscillating first- and third-person perspective as interlocutor, and entering the diegesis of the chapter to converse with and persuade Amelia to direct the story to his whims, as seen in the following passage:

Ami is stretched out on a cloud when he finally reaches her. I trail behind, shaping myself into a skulking dog.

"Hello," she says.

"Hello," he replies.

Make him go away, Ami.

I send the message to her so he can't see it. (Skains, 2013, p. 45)

The second interlocutor of the *Færwhile* tale enters in this chapter as well: a Storyteller who makes her appearance in extradiegetic asides as she and the Trickster bicker over how to shape and tell the stories. The narration now consists of the Trickster's overt narration of Amelia's tale, and the non-narrated extradiegetic exchanges between Trickster and Storyteller, an example of a morphing metaphor that adds a "multidimensional aspect in which a single entity fluctuates between two superimposed functions and identities, hence creating a perceptible blend of the two agents...sounding through the heteroglot and creating new semantic implications" (Bucholz, 2009, pp. 214-215). Toward the end of "Threading"[[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf](#)], Ben is urged to tell an embedded story in order to transport himself from Amelia's cybernetic storyworld to one that will bring him closer to Lilly; while the overt narrator does not shift entirely to Ben, this aspect still introduces Ben for the first time as a narrator within the overall text, adding an additional layer of narration. This layering is not only ambiguous, it is unnatural, as the narrators emerge as a cacophony of voices battling for control of the narrative; thus the text morphs into Richardson's anti-mimetic narrative, calling attention to the narrative structures of narration themselves, becoming unnatural.

This unnatural multiple narration continues in "Streams Slipping in the Dark"[[hypermodal #1/Streams/index.html](#)]: the Storyteller and Trickster continue their metafictional asides; the Trickster narrates sections of this story in both the analogue and digital versions (though in a more covert fashion); and the Storyteller emerges as a covert narrator of the sections involving Lilly. The Storyteller and Trickster's metafictional asides initially suggest they are engaged in a competitive storycrafting

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<sup>6</sup> Note that the digital version of "Threading" is not yet complete, and thus the print version has been provided in this link.

contest, each with their pet characters and themes: they have chosen "sides" of the island the characters are traversing, which is reflected in the digital version as a flipping coin. The digital reader (arbitrarily) chooses a side to enter the story, and receives the sections of the story relevant to either the Trickster or the Storyteller; only on restarting the piece from the opposite side will the digital reader receive the entire story. By the end of the tale (both analogue and digital), the sides have become muddled — neither Trickster nor Storyteller remember which side of the story they chose, and in the final scene one of them enters the story as the Queen character. The text does not explicitly identify the Queen as either Trickster or Storyteller; its ambiguity suggests, as intended, that the Queen could represent either figure, and that the two figures are one and the same.

*Færwile's* closing chapter, "Swallowing the Tale's Tail"[hypermodal #1/Tales\_Tail/index.html], switches narration once again, as Lilly narrates her story in first-person for the first time. The ambiguity in this chapter is replaced with an almost refreshing clarity of narrative voice. As Lilly's consciousness fades, however, she urges Ben, Amelia, and Hal to take up the story, to keep it alive through their own narration. The narrative perspective switches to a third-person covert narrator, mirroring that of "Lost"[hypermodal #1/Lost.html] and "Awake" (analogue), while the dialogue sequences feature first Amelia, then Hal, and finally Ben picking up the narration of the story itself, much as Ben did in "Threading"[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf]. In the digital version, this overt narrator is morphed entirely into each character's homodiegetic perspective in each section.

On the surface it seems that *Færwile* has circled back onto its introductory narration, wiping away all the ambiguity and confusion of the unnatural narrative perspectives presented along the way. Richardson (2006) argues that these contradictory, permeable, and dis-framed narrators lead to "postmodern unreliability" (p. 103). This particular project both upholds and denies that notion of unreliability. On the one hand, the chapters progress from straightforward mimetic narration, of the sort

that readers typically accept as reliable, through a layered narration that incorporates ambiguous narration and metalepsis, and seems to be moving toward a centrifugal multiple narration wherein the text becomes an "...irreducible galaxy of different, heterogenous or antithetical perspectives" (p. 62). But while both "Streams"[hypermodal #1/Streams/index.html] and "Tail"[hypermodal #1/Tales\_Tail/index.html] seem fragmented and permeable, with their multiple narrators and disparate voices, the thematic transgression of narrative power in these chapters reverses the progression, reducing the disparate voices to a centripetal multiple narration, "to a single narrating position at the end" (p. 62). The message here is that no story is entirely mimetic, no tale is strictly homodiegetic, restricted to the existents and events that a single narrator (or implied author) cares to tell; every character (and by extrapolation, every person) has a voice in their own story. Lilly is both Trickster and Storyteller, weaving her story from all the different perspectives of the characters within it, but through them maintaining her own singular narration. In "Swallowing the Tale's Tail"[hypermodal #1/Tales\_Tail/index.html], when she fades away, she turns her story over to Ben and Amelia, who take it up and weave their own stories, which begin in Lilly's story. In this manner, *Færwhile* is both thesis and antithesis to Richardson's 2006 notion of postmodern unreliability through narrative perspective.

#### **Transgressing Narrative Boundaries: Metalepsis**

The various layers of narrative perspective in *Færwhile* are strongly linked to the narrative levels present; as *Færwhile* was conceived as a story that would range across a reality-based storyworld, into various locales of a fantasy world, and again into aspects of dream, varying narrative levels in the diegesis alone was essential. Yet while this is not the first story I have written incorporating multiple levels of diegetic story, it is the first to engage in ontological metalepsis, defined as "(1) vertical interactions either between the actual world and a storyworld or between nested storyworlds, or as (2) horizontal transmigrations between storyworlds" (Bell & Alber, 2012, p. 166; cf.

Genette, 1980; Ryan, 2006). Alice Bell & Jan Alber (2012) also note that very few print examples of metalepsis exist, calling for the need to examine narrative forms outside print in order to explore the practice (p. 169). Metalepsis is often inherent in digital texts: Ryan (2006) specifically notes the necessary engagement with both the storyworld and the extradiegetic storyworld in interactive fictions and games (p. 135) as well as mapping functions of hypertexts (p. 144); Hayles (2002) explores the interplay of the diegetic poem and the hypodiegetic code of code poetry.

Given this scarcity in print texts in general, and specifically in my own work, I suggest that the prominence of metalepsis in multimodal forms, and in this project in particular, is at least partially due to the multi-level nature of the composition process. Just as narratives are theorised to have narrative levels or layers — diegetic discourse, hypodiegetic embedded tales, hyperdiegetic metafiction, etc. — so too does the process of multimodal composition. The digital author in the activity of composition is engaging with the diegetic text-produced-so-far (as displayed in a preview output) and various levels of the hypodiegetic text-produced-so-far (writing code, constructing images, recording audio, etc.). Dave Ciccoricco (2012) notes that this "architectonic space" (Kaplan & Moulthrop in Ciccoricco, 2012) in which multimedia design and composition occurs is "paradoxically stable and dynamic...a rich palette for perspectives that entail elements of textual structure, formal design, and referential storyworld" (p. 260). The digital author necessarily transgresses these composition levels in multimodal composition; the cognitive processes engaged in the act of composition affects the composition itself — in this case, transgressing composition levels facilitates metalepsis in the ontological narrative.

Metalepsis in *Færwhile* arises out of this architectonic space initially in the form of descending metalepsis, wherein characters or narrators jump to a lower level of diegesis (the highest narrative level being the *actual*) into hypodiegetic stories (as defined by Bell & Alber, 2012; cf. Ryan, 2006). The boundaries between narrative levels in *Færwhile* are identifiable as: the diegetic level of Ben's Los



Angeles, Amelia's Wales, and Lilly's foster family; the embedded hypodiegetic level of the many lands of Færwhile; and the hyperdiegetic level where the Storyteller and the Trickster craft and manipulate the characters and storyworlds. Ben and Amelia, respectively in "Lost"[hypermodal #1/Lost.html] and "Puerta"[hypermodal #1/Puerta/index.html], descend from the diegetic level into the hypodiegetic Færwhile. Lilly alternates between descent into Færwhile, and ascent into the diegetic world, represented as her nightmares. Once entrenched in Færwhile, the characters move horizontally across the various storyworlds: Lilly and Hal depart Babbingen, Ben and Amelia depart Amelia's cyber-constructed world in "Threading"[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf], all to enter the island queendom in "Streams"[hypermodal #1/Streams/index.html], subsequently traversing the geography of Færwhile by train to enter the final storyworld of "Swallowing the Tale's Tale"[hypermodal #1/Tales\_Tail/index.html]. These are all examples of metalepsis at story level, as boundaries between stories are violated, leading to "confusion between distinct ontological levels" (Cohn & Gleich, 2012, p. 106).

The text enters rhetorical metalepsis in the hyperdiegetic level in the form of the metafictional dialogue between Trickster and the Storyteller that appear in both "Threading"[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf] and "Streams"[hypermodal #1/Streams/index.html]. This rhetorical metalepsis "interrupts the representation of the current level through a voice that originates in or addresses a lower level, but without popping the top level from the stack" (Ryan, 2006, p. 206). These occasions do not violate the boundaries between narrative levels; when the Trickster/Storyteller descends into "Threading"[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf] and "Streams"[hypermodal #1/Streams/index.html] as a character, however, conversing with Amelia or ruling as Queen, the ontological levels "become entangled...causing two separate environments to blend" (p. 207). As the narrative progresses, the characters begin to engage in ascending metalepsis: Ben takes on the role of

narrator at the end of "Threading"[hypermodal #1/ThreadingAnalogue.pdf] in order to control which horizontal storyworld he enters; Lilly ascends to narration to control her own demise, passing on her acquired power to Hal, Amelia, and Ben in "Swallowing the Tale's Tail"[hypermodal #1/Tales\_Tail/index.html]. This ascendance to narrative perspective offers the closing metaphor for the story: the characters' (and by extension, the readers') control over the story increases as they assume a narrative voice, choosing to tell and direct their own discourse rather than following that of an unknown and fickle extradiegetic storyteller.

It is worth noting that these final examples of metalepsis are not ontological, as the characters are not transgressing the boundaries of the identified narrative levels. Rather, the challenge is on the level of narrative perspective: the characters wrest control of their story not by leaping across levels, but by seizing the role of narrator. In the opening chapters, the Trickster narrates the story, crafting it entirely, assuming an authorial role in both the narration and the descent into diegetic discourse to manipulate both Ben and Amelia into traveling to Færwhile. The progression into layered multiple narration demonstrates a fragmentation of control, which is lost to the characters entirely in the closing chapter. Thus the challenges to the structure of the discourse that most strongly communicate the underlying metaphor of the story arise primarily from disruption of the narrative perspective, and secondarily from ontological metalepsis.

### Conclusion

Contemporary narratives, including modern and postmodern literature, film, and digital fiction, trend toward seeing existence as "fragmented — as multiple, discontinuous, discordant, and confusing" (Beja, 1979, p. 76), toward creating, fragmenting, and reconstructing narrative voices (Richardson, 2006, p. ix). Jenny Weight (2006) notes that technology affects the human experience, that the

computer is a "performative device of unique capacity, sensitivity and complexity, which encourages a wide range of human creativity, interpretation and, indeed, collaboration" between the writer, the apparatus, and the reader (p. 416). The conventions of various digital genres engage fundamentally in unnatural narration, including the conventional use of second-person perspective and necessary metalepsis in interactive fictions and other ludic platforms.

Ciccoricco (2012) notes that "[i]n multimodal digital fictions, the domain of interface design can permeate that of the diegesis" (p. 260); the cognitive processes of the digital, multimodal composition of *Færwhile* significantly affected the narrative structures of the creative artefacts. The hyperlink as a narrative device affords multiple reading paths to the reader; it also affords multiple writing paths to the writer, encouraging them to explore a multitude of characters and potential narrative strands in the planning and translation stages of composition. In this project, that multiplicity of cognitive engagement pushed the narration in the artefact beyond an ostensibly mimetic back-and-forth narration through ambiguity and into anti-mimetic, layered multiple narration that called attention to the structure and power of narrative perspective. The progression of the narrative through both centrifugal and centripetal narration calls attention to the unreliability of narrative voice, while firmly grounding the power of narrative in the perspective of whomever takes control, whether character or reader.

Similarly, the layering of architectonic spaces, and the requisite transgression called for in creating digital fictions that are built from layers of often simultaneously displayed and edited code, image, sound and text-as-displayed led to both ontological metalepsis and analogous challenges to power through narration. These challenges to the stability of the narrative levels and the authority of the narrator blend to offer a clear theme communicated through the very structure of the discourse: every person must seek to control their own story, rather than letting it fall to the arbitrary whims of an

interlocutor.

Thus the practice of multimodal digital composition itself facilitates unnatural narratives, and to a certain degree naturalises their unconventional elements. Second person perspective is conventional for some forms of digital fiction, as is transgression across narrative levels. Potential narratives — formed through hyperlinks and polylinearity dictated by reader interactivity — are conventional for interactive fictions and hyperfictions and games. The digital writer engaged in the cognitive processes of planning and translating the many possibilities of narrative into the multiplicity of composition levels is thus encouraged by the apparatus to transgress narrative boundaries and authority as well.

If engaging in multiple narrative possibilities and composition levels leads to these cognitive tendencies toward transgression in narrative fiction, how might the daily, habitual use of these layered spaces affect our understanding of our world, ourselves, and our communities? We note that TV audiences now engage in several different screens when following their favorite stories (TNS Global, 2014), and we lament the digital distractions and supposed ill-effects of all of our technology. We worry that engagement with so many layers of communication all at once makes our attention spans miniscule and our engagement with any one text shallow and meaningless. But what this research shows, at least in particular activities such as composition, is that these multiple engagements can actually lead to new pathways, new potentials, new structures for cognition and communication. That they can open up a writer's imagination to areas of thought and exploration that might have been left to wither and die in monomodal, linear composition spaces perhaps suggests that these digital environments also affect cognition and communication in other areas, such as social media, identity construction online, and engagement in multiple digital layers. The cognitive attention at work in these multimodal spaces, devices, and applications may be fragmenting, but this research shows they are also opening the mind to alternate perspectives, approaches, structures, and expression. The affordances of

digital composition and distribution allow for an incredible array of social communication, through social media, user-generated content, and networked knowledge; this study shows just one aspect of how cognition is evolving to adjust and exploit these opportunities. [Further research, perhaps expanding more broadly into further aspects of social communication and interaction online, can build off these findings, further illuminating the effects that thinking, communicating, and "living" in digital spaces has on culture and society as a whole.](#)

**Commented [EU2]:** We really like how you've connected this article to the work of qualitative social scientists. But we think one more sentence (or even a clause) here that once again reminds readers of your works usefulness to qualitative social science researchers would be good here. Can you add one?

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